

•

•

•

•

•

•

•

•

•

•

•

Exclusive: Dozens killed in U.S. boat strikes remain unidentified

• SHARE THIS —

•

•

•

•

-

FEATURED SHOWS





-



-



-



-



MSNBC TV

- **WATCH LIVE**
- **LISTEN LIVE**

MORE

- [MSNBC LIVE EVENTS](#)
- [MSNBC ON PEACOCK](#)
- [MSNBC COLUMNISTS](#)
- [TV SCHEDULE](#)
- [MSNBC NEWSLETTERS](#)
- [PODCASTS](#)
- [TRANSCRIPTS](#)
- [MSNBC INSIGHTS COMMUNITY](#)
- [MSNBC STORE](#)
- [HELP](#)

FOLLOW MSNBC

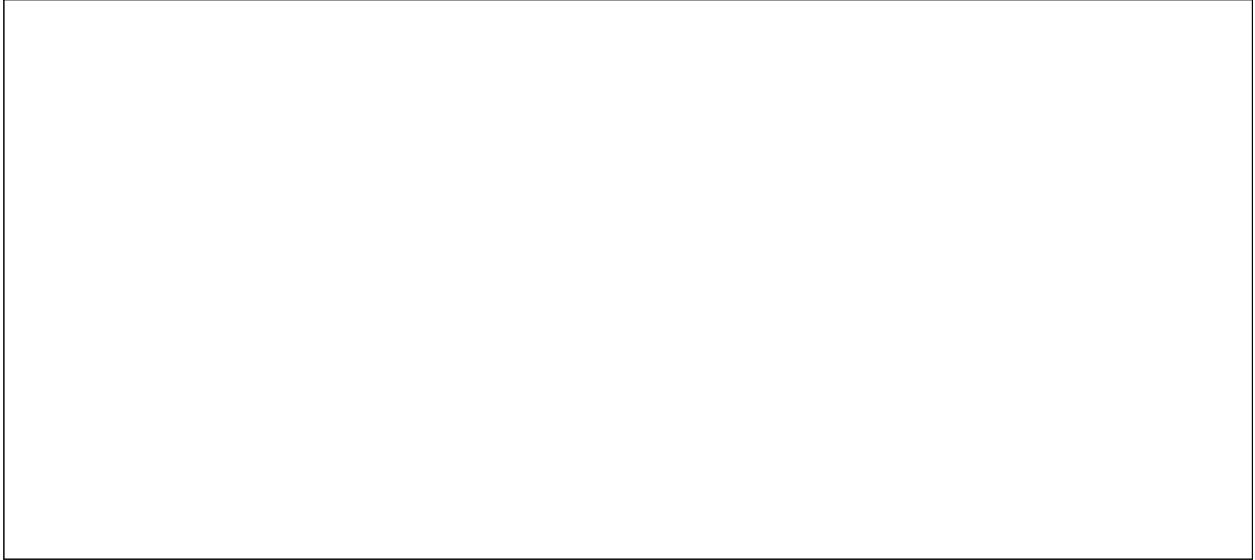
-
-
-

MORE BRANDS

MORE SHOWS

- [WAY TOO EARLY](#)
- [ANA CABRERA REPORTS](#)
- [CHRIS JANSING REPORTS](#)
- [KATY TUR REPORTS](#)
- [THE WEEKEND](#)
- [VELSHI](#)

- ALEX WITT REPORTS
- POLITICSNATION
- THE WEEKEND: PRIMETIME
- [Blue Sky](#)
- [Whatsapp](#)
- [Print](#)
- [Reddit](#)
- [Flipboard](#)
- [Pinterest](#)
- [Linkedin](#)





People along the Gulf of Paria on Nov. 04, 2025 in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Joe Raedle / Getty Images

Nov. 7, 2025, 1:38 PM EST

By [David Rohde](#)

Up to 50 people killed in U.S. drone strikes in the Caribbean and Pacific remain publicly unknown two months after the Trump administration began attacking suspected drug boats, according to MSNBC interviews with congressional officials, human rights monitors and journalists in the region.

Pentagon officials have not publicly disclosed the names of the 69 people the U.S. says it has killed. Governments in the region have said little publicly, mindful of U.S. might and the potential for retribution by the Trump administration.

And in addition to the gap in public knowledge, there's a private void for the families of the missing. Local journalists in Venezuela, Colombia and Trinidad tell MSNBC that the family members fear speaking out, worried that they could be retaliated against by drug traffickers, their own governments or the U.S. government.

"They are afraid," Ronna Rísquez, a Venezuelan investigative journalist, told MSNBC. "They are simply afraid."

Alejandro Carranza, killed in one of the initial strikes, is one of two Colombians who have been publicly reported as being on boats that were attacked.

In an interview, Carranza's niece, Lizbeth Perez, told MSNBC that her uncle was a fisherman and her family has not received information or assistance from the Colombian or American governments.

"We haven't received any help," she said.

The dead likely include a mix of low-level drug traffickers who knew of illicit cargo, and day laborers or fishermen who did not, according to family members, human rights groups and journalists in the region.

Two congressional officials who spoke on condition of anonymity told MSNBC that — based on Pentagon briefings and questions the administration has failed to answer — they believe the Trump administration does not know the identities of many of the people who have been killed.

So far, two citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, two Colombians, nine Venezuelans and one Ecuadorian killed in the strikes have been publicly identified by their families in news reports. The governments of Trinidad and Tobago, Colombia and Ecuador did not respond to requests from MSNBC for the numbers of their citizens who have died in the strikes.

Venezuelan officials have strongly criticized the U.S. strikes, calling them "extrajudicial executions." They also deny that drug cartels operate in Venezuela and have not publicly confirmed the killing of any Venezuelan in the boat attacks.

In a rare display of bipartisanship in Washington, two Republican and two Democratic House members sent a letter to the administration this week demanding more information about the people killed in the strikes. Reps. Don Bacon, R-Neb., Mike Turner, R-Ohio, Seth Moulton, D-Mass., and Jason Crow, D-Colo., asked for evidence that they were narcotics traffickers.

"Cartels often force low-income individuals into maritime smuggling through threats or deception," they wrote. "What evidence confirms that those killed were cartel operatives, rather than coerced, deceived, or trafficked civilians?"

Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., an outspoken opponent of the strikes, has said that a quarter of the boats stopped by the U.S. Coast Guard on suspicion of carrying drugs near the U.S. are found to have no narcotics.

"The Coast Guard doesn't blow up boats off Miami because 25 percent of the time their suspicion is wrong," Paul said Thursday. "To kill indiscriminately is akin to summary execution."

Hours later, Senate Republicans voted down for a second time a war powers resolution that would have limited President Donald Trump's ability to launch attacks against Venezuela but not impacted boat strikes. Paul and Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, were the only two Republicans to support the measure.

On Friday morning, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth [announced on X](#) that three men suspected of being drug traffickers were killed in a U.S. strike. He said the strike occurred in international waters, the vessel was carrying narcotics and no U.S. forces were harmed.

"To all narco-terrorists who threaten our homeland: if you want to stay alive, stop trafficking drugs," Hegseth added. "If you keep trafficking deadly drugs — we will kill you."

Chief Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said U.S. intelligence showed that the men on all the boats were trafficking narcotics, without offering any details of that intelligence.

"Since the Department of War began striking these vessels, we have consistently said that our intelligence did indeed confirm that the individuals involved in these drug operations were narco-terrorists, and we stand by that assessment," Parnell said.

In a statement to MSNBC, White House deputy press secretary Anna Kelly said the administration "believes its strikes in Venezuela are lawful and critical for the protection of American lives from the scourge of illegal narcotics. Last night's vote in the United States Senate was a recognition of that reality. All actions comply fully with the law of armed conflict. The President was elected with a resounding mandate to take on the cartels and stop illicit drugs from flooding into our country, and he is delivering."

Fear across the region

One of the people killed in the U.S. strikes who has been publicly identified by name is Chad Joseph, a 26-year-old from Trinidad and Tobago who was working as a day laborer in Venezuela, according to his mother, Lenore Burnley.

Recommended



OPINION [Why this U.S. Catholic leader is not the right fit for this moment](#)



TOP-STORIES [BBC issues apology to Trump following Jan. 6 speech editing controversy](#)

In a phone interview with MSNBC, Burnley said her son was returning to Trinidad and Tobago by boat after several months of work. She said that she is speaking out because U.S. forces are required by international maritime law to intercept and inspect boats suspected of trafficking drugs — not destroy them without warning.

“They’re not supposed to kill human beings like that,” Burnley told MSNBC. “I don’t know what to do.”

Joseph is one of at least two Trinidadians known to have been killed in the strikes. The total number killed is unclear.

“Nobody knows,” Denise Pitcher, a human rights activist in Trinidad and Tobago, told MSNBC in a telephone interview. “We know about these two individuals because they were in touch with their families.”

Officials in the island nation have said that Joseph was charged with a drug-related crime in 2018, and that the other Trinidadian known to be killed in a strike, Rishi Samaroo, served time in prison for his role in a 2009 murder of a street vendor before being released in 2021.

Pitcher, the former executive director of the Caribbean Centre for Human Rights, acknowledged that some passengers in the boats may have been engaged in criminal activity but said it is impossible to know because people in Trinidad and Tobago, like Venezuela, fear speaking out. “In a small country like Trinidad and Tobago, it’s easy to be targeted,” she said. “People are scared here.”

Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar has supported the U.S. strikes, and Pitcher said Trinidad and Tobago has little choice: It is trapped — geographically and economically — between Venezuela, and the U.S. oil-

rich Venezuela lies only seven miles away from southern Trinidad and has a population 20 times larger. The U.S., meanwhile, is Trinidad's largest trading partner.

"I think the prime minister thought it was prudent to align herself with the most powerful country in the world," Pitcher said. "If hostilities did begin, at least we would be protected."

'These are not drug kingpins'

Rísquez, the Venezuelan investigative journalist, has written a book on Tren de Aragua, one of the criminal gangs the Trump administration is targeting. She told MSNBC that she has sympathy for ordinary Venezuelans caught between the cartels, the Maduro regime's faltering economy and the Trump administration's strikes.

"People from the area, in order to make a living and have some source of income, have dedicated themselves to drug trafficking," she said, referring to Venezuela's northern coast.

An [Associated Press story](#) published on Friday said that one of its journalists based in Venezuela had spoken with relatives or residents of towns on the Paria Peninsula who said nine Venezuelan men died in the strikes.

They said most of the men worked as crew members on the boats for the first or second time and made at least \$500 for each trip. They said the men included a fisherman, a motorcycle taxi driver, laborers and two low-level career criminals, according to the AP. One was a well-known local crime leader who had agreed to work for narcotics smugglers.

Rísquez emphasized that the smugglers on the boats are not senior leaders of drug cartels and called them low-level "mules." "They handle some logistical operations like drug handling, but they are not the drug owners," she said. "They are not the ones controlling the operation. Killing them won't end drug trafficking."

A congressional official with knowledge of past U.S. interdiction efforts agreed that the traffickers on board the boats are likely low-level smugglers.

"These are not drug kingpins," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "These are not decision-makers."

A limited effect?

A former senior U.S. national security official who also spoke on condition of anonymity questioned the long-term effect on drug trafficking even if the administration achieves both of its stated goals: limiting narcotics trafficking by sea and toppling the authoritarian Maduro regime.

“No one has said you take out Maduro and the drug trade dries up,” the former senior national security official told MSNBC.

The former senior national security official acknowledged that Maduro and other Venezuelan officials engage in drug trafficking, but predicted that other traffickers will replace them if the regime is toppled. And if the sea remains unsafe, cartel leaders will shift to smuggling drugs by land, the official said.

“I don’t think it’s going to cause the JNCG or Sinaloa cartel to say, ‘Wait, this is too dangerous,’” said the official, referring to Mexico’s Jalisco New Generation Cartel and the cartel founded by Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán. “These guys feed their rivals to tigers. They are not easily intimidated.”

— *Priya Sridhar, Kay Guerrero and Rosa Flores contributed to this piece.*



[David Rohde](#)

David Rohde is the senior national security reporter for MSNBC. Previously he was the senior executive editor for national security and law for NBC News, editing stories about national security and law enforcement and writing stories about the Justice Department and FBI. He is the author of five books, most recently, "[Where Tyranny Begins: The Justice Department, the FBI and the War on Democracy](#)."

Sponsored Stories

THECIVICPOST.COM

Nutritionists Stunned By Japanese Belt That Burns Body Fat

JUNIE BOUTIQUE

Handcrafted Since 1975 — Junie’s Final Bags at Up To 80%

Off

by [Taboola](#)